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Case Turns Spotlight on CIA's Handling of Soviet Defectors

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U.S. officials yesterday continued to reject charges by Soviet intelligence agent Vitaly Yurchenko that they had drugged or tortured him, but a former intelligence officer and another Soviet defector charged that the Central Intelligence Agency has mishandled Soviet defectors in the past.

Donald Jameson, a retired CIA official who debriefed many Soviet defectors during his career and has befriended many more since retiring 12 years ago, said yesterday that he has been told of "definite cases of thoroughly inadequate handling" of some recent defectors. He said they did not complain of physical abuse, but said that their CIA and FBI debriefers "didn't understand who they were, how to handle them, how to meet their needs as human beings."

Jameson's comments were echoed by the wife of a Soviet diplomat who defected in 1977. E. Alexandra Costa—a name she assumed after defecting—said the debriefing process was dehumanized to the point that defectors, already torn by guilt and family separations, are susceptible to changing their minds.

She said Yurchenko's redefection "didn't have to happen" and that she asked three weeks ago, through the FBI, to see him, on the theory that he was probably feeling lonely and would enjoy a conversation in Russian with another defector. The FBI people she approached reacted enthusiastically to her suggestion, she said, but the CIA officers handling Yurchenko never replied to it.

Yurchenko told a news conference Monday that he had not been allowed to speak Russian for three months by his CIA handlers, and a senior CIA official indicated yesterday that Yurchenko was forced to speak English much of the time. However, Jameson and other experts interviewed yesterday said they doubted Yurchenko's claim that he was forced to speak English. "That's impossible. That would have been a monstrous tactical mistake," one said.

Jameson and other intelligence officials who have participated in debriefing Soviet defectors said that CIA and FBI handlers are trained to recognize and try to counteract the depression that many defectors fall into after making the traumatic decision to leave their homeland.

"One of the key roles of the man in charge [of the debriefing] is to establish a rapport and an understanding with the individual so that what happened Saturday night doesn't happen," Jameson said, referring to Yurchenko's disappearance.

Another former CIA defector expert said, "The whole effort is designed to create a relaxed atmosphere."

He said the safe houses for important defectors are luxurious, sometimes with a swimming pool and tennis court.

"Initially the idea is to make them feel comfortable with their decision, to let them know they are in the hands of people who will take care of them, to make them feel important, to tell them how important their information is."

However, Costa, who defected nearly a decade ago, said her CIA handlers failed to make her feel comfortable. Instead, she said, soon after she left her husband, who was a first secretary at the Soviet Embassy here, to defect, she was left alone in a McLean safe house over the Labor Day weekend with her two small children and no car or food.

Later she was told the CIA would enroll her in a secretarial school, she said, although she had a PhD in social sciences and an IQ of 154. After she protested, the FBI helped her get into a graduate program at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business.

Costa said the CIA people assigned to her had lied to her and subjected her to psychological abuse. Defection is "a devastating experience" emotionally, she said, adding that Soviets particularly seemed to rely on bonds with friends and family in times of stress. Cut off from that traditional support, she said, they may feel vulnerable and guilty about their decision to leave their homeland and relatives.

One reason for the sensitivity surrounding the handling of defectors is the possibility that a defector might be a fake agent sent by the Soviets to disrupt U.S. intelligence services.

For instance, in the 1960s CIA officials kept KGB defector Yuri Nosenko in isolation for 3½ years because they thought he was a fake. According to congressional testimony years later, "his reading privileges were suspended from November 1965 to May 1967" and lint he was hoarding to make calendars and a chess set was confiscated. Although some intelligence officials were never convinced that Nosenko was sincere, he was later fully rehabilitated and hired as a consultant to the CIA.

The first face-to-face meeting between the defector and his handler includes signing a form in which the Soviet says he is talking voluntarily and is seeking asylum in the United States, the former officials said. State Department officials said Yurchenko signed such a statement.

The defector is then taken through a detailed series of debriefings that seek first to elicit important current intelligence, such as the possibility of Soviet penetration of U.S. intelligence. That is followed by a lengthy recounting of the subject's history, and questions about his knowledge of other Soviet intelligence officials and operations.

After a week or two, the defector is asked to take polygraph tests to check his veracity and psychological tests to check his stability.

The debriefing sessions are broken up occasionally by dinner or shopping, the experts said.

Staff writer Patrick E. Tyler contributed to this report.